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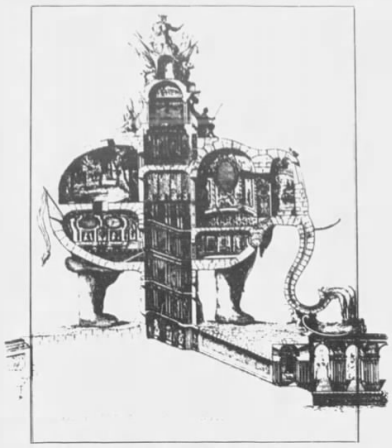
A Vacation From Good Taste



Cutaway of "The Triumphal Elephant," a pavilion designed by C. F. Ribart, 1758, but never built.

Forget Giza—Have You Seen the Pyramid to the Pig?

Lucinda Lambton's recently published book, "Beastly Buildings" (Atlantic Monthly Press, $19.95), is a snare and a delusion. Thinking that the word *beastly* was used in the usual English sense of *nasty, horrid, vile, repellent, disgusting*, and always having wanted someone to compile an anthology of Bad Taste buildings, I bought the book without looking beyond the dust jacket.

When I got the Lambton book home, I eagerly opened it and found that it was all about stables, kennels and other edifices associated with—*beasts*. What a shock! I had almost literally bought a pig in a poke.

Admittedly, some of the buildings are beastly in every sense. There is incongruity, at the least, in an obelisk to a pig, a tomb to a trout, a pyramid to poultry and a temple for terrapins. In 1788, the Earl-Bishop of Derry commissioned from architect John Soane a "residence for a canine family." The Earl-Bishop must have been barking mad; the kennel had classical columns and a dome like a cathedral's.

Near Thetford, England, stone pheasants were "hung" over the entrance archway to the stable yard of Shadwell Park, a Gothic monstrosity built between 1856 and 1860. In the 18th Century, a pyramid to a pig was put up near Plymouth, England, by the Countess of Mount Edgcumbe. It commemorated her beloved pet pig, Cupid; but satirist "Peter Pindar" (Dr. John Walcot) wrote:

O dry that tear so round and big,
Nor waste in sighs your precious wind,
Death only takes a single pig—
Your Lord and son are left behind.

As it happens, a book on Bad Taste architecture *has* been published: Richard Meltzer's "Guide to the Ugliest Buildings in Los Angeles" (Illuminati, 1984, $4.95). It is not as large as the Encyclopaedia Britannica; in fact, it is one of the slimmest books published in recent years. It categorizes the city's architecture in the way first made popular by the late Sir Osbert Lancaster in his book "Pillar to Post" (1938). The targets of Meltzer's scorn include such styles as "Aztlan Recidivist" (a Studio City villa with eyeball-like windows) and "Banco Rococo Repugnante" (a 1940s black-marble-and-gilt bank in Encino). Meltzer is very funny. I treasure his description of "The Doody-Colored Mystery," a furniture store in Woodland Hills that he assigns to the "Mutant Beehive Moderne" style.

Of course, taste in architecture changes. In the moralistic 1930s, the austere International Style was "in" and the adornments of late-19th-Century buildings were deplored. But after World War II, when people again felt the need for some fun and extravagance after years of austerity, there was a new appreciation of what might be called "larkitecture"—follies and fantasies. In 1953, Barbara Jones' book "Follies and Grottoes" was published, with her own fine illustrations.

A folly is the opposite of an architectural cliche. It is a vacation from good taste. Some of the most eccentric follies were put up by English landowners of the 18th and early 19th centuries. One Sussex landowner, known with good reason as "Mad Jack Fuller," bet a friend one night that a local church spire could be seen from the dining-room window of Fuller's house. The cold light of dawn revealed that it could not be seen; so Fuller had a gang of workmen build, with great speed, a replica of the spire, in full view of his window. By that stratagem he won the bet.

Lord Hylton built a 150-foot copy of a lighthouse on the grounds of his home, Ammerdown Park, near Bath. Not to be outdone, a neighboring landowner named John Turner built a 180-foot tower in medieval Italian style only a mile away. He thought he would be able to serve teas and charge for admission, but the enterprise was a failure, and the tower was bought by Hylton and was later demolished. Hylton's own tower should have had its place in "Beastly Buildings": a cow once "committed suicide" by lumbering up the stairs inside and falling off.

Lucinda Lambton, herself the daughter of an English lord, restricts her book to Britain and Ireland. But the craziest "beastly" follies were conceived on the Continent and in America. Perhaps the most preposterous ever designed was never built: a pavilion in the form of an elephant, drawn by French artist C. F. Ribart in 1758. The nearest approximations to it that were actually built are the Elephant Hotel in Atlantic City, N.J., and Lucy the Elephant in Margate, N.J. □

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